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ABSTRACT

Of the total population of 29 black female superintendents in the United States, 22 participated in this study. Interviews included highly structured and semistructured questions concerning the career and success patterns, circumstances that affected their present status, and the future role of black women as chief administrators of public school districts. The typical black woman superintendent is 46 years of age or older, married, and has two or more children. She began teaching in an elementary school and advanced to diverse supervisory positions by age 36. Doctorate degrees were held by 68 percent of the women. Overwhelmingly, the respondents feel that a combination of racism with sexism is the reason that black women hold so few superintendencies. However, the respondents are very satisfied in their choice of career and would choose the same one again. They predict that, as school populations shift in urban centers from majority to minority enrollments, more black women will enter administration and advance to the superintendency at an earlier age. Recommendations to improve black women's career opportunities are listed and 14 references are appended. (MLF)

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A Description of Black Female School Superintendents

A Paper Presented at

The American Educational Research Association

Annual Meeting

San Francisco, California

Symposium: The Black Superintendency: Challenge or Crisis?

April 16, 1986

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Introduction

Although Black women superintendents have been emerging as prominent figures in selected school districts in recent years, their evolution has not been exhibitory by historical accounts. Little is known regarding this genre of superintendent. Therefore, given the dearth of descriptive data about this phenomenon, the writer was compelled to critically examine in a logically related sequence the antecedents and subsequent development of the Black female superintendent.

Further, the writer viewed that as school systems sought to satisfy affirmative action regulations and to provide for the upward mobility of women into diverse leadership classifications, egalitarian measures would be employed for all personnel to acquire available superintendencies based on their qualifications and abilities. This has not been necessarily the case. Those who were the least hired for such positions with any regularity were Black women educators.

Scimecca indicated in his profile that "school superintendents in the United States are almost exclusively white and male. Black and female superintendents are few and far between."[1] A related idea advanced by Scott was that ". . . this nation has more than 2 million public school teachers and approximately 16,700 superintendents. . . . Women, blacks, and browns are the major groups most discriminated against in recruiting and selecting a superintendent. In 1974, women held 86 superintendencies or approximately 0.5 percent. The 44 black superintendents constituted about 0.25 percent."[2]

But despite the discriminations and antagonistic pulls, Black women have shown inexorable strength and persistence on their journey upward even though their role in educational leadership is void of scholarly documentation beyond the role of principal. The explanation for this denial can be

attributed to historians' omissions in educing the appropriate information about their donations.

In line with this analysis, Lerner added that the Black woman endured a double bind because she has been "victimized by scholarly neglect and racist assumptions."[3]

Focusing on the absence of historical documentation of Black women in higher school leadership positions were Jones and Montenegro, whose records showed that "Black women in recorded history have been teachers, principals, and founders of schools, but none of them before 1956 can be singled out as a superintendent."[4] Recognizing the same problem was Scott, who wrote that "even though blacks served in superintendencies before the late sixties, the education profession was unaware of or ignored their existence."[5]

Before 1956, the fact that a Black woman superintendent existed was obscured. There is no published resource to draw upon even at this time of this exemplary superintendent. This stalwart woman, Velma Dolphin Ashley, began the superintendent's position on July 1, 1944, at the age of 32 and headed the Boley, Oklahoma, school district for 12 years. She resigned her position in 1956 at which time her husband, Lillard Ashley, succeeded her as school superintendent. Velma Ashley continued as a volunteer administrative assistant to her husband during his tenure from 1956 to 1976.[6] Unfortunately, Doughty's argument concerning Black female administrators such as Ashley was perhaps a valid assessment: ". . . nobody knows her name. She is, for statistical purposes, invisible."[7]

Ironically, it was during the same time in the 1970s when Ashley was assisting her husband with superintending duties that three Black women journeyed to the top echelon of urban school districts: notably, Edith Gaines, Hartford, Connecticut; Margaret Labat, Evanston, Illinois; and amid a wave of

national attention, the most notable was Barbara Sizemore, Washington, D.C.[8]

The pioneering efforts of these Black women superintendents set the pace for other women, especially Black women, to aspire to the top school posts. By 1978 Black women superintendents had increased their ranks to five. In 1982, of the 176 women superintendents, 11 were Black women,[9] followed by 16 in 1983,[10] 29 in 1984, and 25 in 1985.[11] These numbers are, however, miniscule compared to school superintendents overall. Jones and Montenegro underscored this same contention: "Black women have shown the least gain of all groups--white males, white females, and black males--in relation to acquisition of superintendencies."[12]

To summarize, Black women superintendents in the United States are grossly underrepresented proportionate to their numbers in the educational workforce. Although they are prolific as teachers, they are practically barren as chief school administrators. Indeed, their tenuous and precarious status accords them the classification as endangered species.

Purpose

This study sought to describe the career and success patterns of Black women as chief administrators of public school districts. The study was further designed to describe the circumstances that affected their present status and future role in the superintendency. This description served to form a basis of the typical Black woman superintendent.

Sample

The total population of Black female superintendents composed the sample of the study. They were identified from several data-gathering sources. Ebony Magazine served as the initial source for identification of

these women from a feature article entitled "Superwomen of Public Education" published in 1983.

Dr. Charles Moody, founder of the National Alliance of Black School Educators, supplied a roster containing the names of 27 Black women superintendents in the United States.[13] Project Aware, American Association of School Administrators, was contacted to reveal new names, as were peers and the women themselves.

Of the total population, 22 (75.8 percent) agreed to participate. Seven women were unwilling to participate because of pressing school district responsibilities, too many prior requests soliciting their research participation, or the inability of the researcher to make contact with a few of the women after repeated attempts. The respondents were represented by urban, suburban, and rural school districts. Twenty (91.0 percent) of these women headed school districts comprised of elementary/secondary, while 16 (72.8 percent) were city superintendents, one directed a secondary-only district, 2 (9.1 percent) were rural/suburban, 3 (13.6 percent) were county superintendents, and one headed a community school type district. A community school district is a divisional district within a large city district governed by its own school board.

The district size among the respondents was diverse, ranging from a low of 300 enrollment to a high of 88,700.

Methodology and Procedure

A survey technique using personal interviews was devised to produce a biographical description of the superintendents and their views in relation to their jobs. The interview guide included an appropriate instrument devoted to demographic, biographic, and descriptive information. In order to validate the findings and to make the instrument more proficient for research purposes,

a jury of professional experts verified the instrument followed by the conduct of a pilot study.

Since there was a need to elicit broader, more in-depth responses, the interview guide included highly structured questions, semistructured or open-ended questions, and probes which allowed for more complete data and depth of motivations to be obtained.

Interview techniques included handwritten notes and tape-recorded interviews of the sample and the social setting in which the interviews occurred. Data were transcribed, analyzed, and classified into a draft under the appropriate categories of research questions. Relevant data from the responses were summarized and assigned to the research question to which they related. Other themes growing out of the data were categorized and utilized.

Black female superintendents were visited and interviewed in the states of Alabama, California, Georgia, Illinois, Minnesota, Mississippi, New Jersey, New York, Ohio, Virginia, and the District of Columbia.

Descriptive data were compiled and displayed using percentages and a qualitative essay to represent the superintendents' characteristics. Since the interview guide served as a measurement instrument for this study, it allowed for more subjective evaluation. It was not devised to gather data via tabulation and rigid quantification.

Problems

Because the nature of this research required a wide geographical area to be visited and unexpected problems arose--namely, limited availability of superintendents to hold face-to-face interviews, appointments missed by the superintendents, the constraints of the researcher's and superintendents' time and expense--two interviews were conducted by telephone and tape-recorded

via mechanical means.

Another irregularity was the movement of one superintendent during the process of the study.

Major Findings

The analysis and summary of the findings were correlated in form to the research questions and the interview questions asked of the 22 respondents.

Research Question 1: What is the present state of Black women superintendents in the United States?

Black women superintendents are currently employed by 29 (0.18 percent) of the over 16,000 public school districts in the United States in the 1984-85 school year. In numbers of Black women superintendents employed by state, California led with six; New York and New Jersey employed four each; Illinois employed three; Minnesota and Ohio employed two each; Alabama, Mississippi, Georgia, Virginia, the District of Columbia, Maryland, Michigan, and Pennsylvania employed one each.

This group of 29 women represented the largest number of Black female superintendents in recorded history in the United States, thus presenting more Black female chief school executive officers in this decade than in any other. Although this increase reflects growth in their ranks, their numbers are still scarce.

More superintendents were found in the 3,000 to 19,999 school district size than in any other, which conforms to that of women superintendents overall. The largest number of schools per district of the subjects was 80 and the smallest was 2. Three (13.6 percent) led districts with 99 percent minority enrollments; 12 (54.5 percent) headed districts with over 50 percent

minority populations. Ten (45.5 percent) directed school districts with less than 30 percent minority students, and one (4.5 percent) led a district with one percent minority population.

Of the 22 respondents queried in this study, the percent who were 36 to 45 years of age was 36.4. The largest number of Black women superintendents were in the age range of 46 years and older (63.6 percent). The mean age they entered their first school administrative position was 36, and the first superintendency was received at a mean age of 45. Seven of the Black female superintendents ranked as middle children in the birth order, six were first born, and the remainder were scattered in ordinal positions within the family constellation.

At the end of summer 1985, the number of Black female superintendents was approximately 25 because of job shifts and nonrenewal of contracts.

Research Question 2: What opinions do these Black women superintendents hold concerning the possible causes of the present status of Black women in the superintendent's position?

Overwhelmingly, from the results of the data, the confounding factor with racism is sexism. Both were seen by the respondents as the reasons that Black women hold so few superintendencies in the United States. These two causes, they felt, were not mutually exclusive.

The iterative pronouncements throughout the interviews indicated there still existed sex-biased and racist attitudes on the part of decision-makers and those who believed women and Blacks were not equipped to handle such jobs. Even though federal legislation has been enacted to remedy the problems of gender and race discrimination, they expressed concern that discrimination

in hiring continues to be manifested in blatant and subtle ways.

Black women, they reported, experienced a double bind in their ascension to the superintendency which constricts or inhibits their progress. Negative superintendent-board relations, lack of internships, few role models to emulate, and an absence of a networking system are other causes that appear to have an impact on their present status indicated by the respondents.

Research Question 3: What has been the path of career success for these women superintendents?

All respondents polled had served as classroom teachers. Beyond that commonality, their pathways to the superintendency were diverse. Black women entered administration at a later age (36.6 years) than their male counterparts; therefore, they are older, on the average, when they secure their first superintendency (45 years). It took these women approximately 8.4 years to traverse from their initial administrative experience to the level of superintendent.

Before assuming the superintendency, the women in this study served as elementary and secondary principals, supervisors, directors, assistant and associate superintendents, and university professors.

As indicated in the mainstream of the literature, the principalship, usually beginning at the elementary level, is the typical entrée toward accessing to the superintendency, but six of these respondents bypassed the principalship altogether and nine of the subjects bypassed the customary secondary principalship on their route there.

Black women superintendents have been employed in education from 17 years to 42 years from the least to the most, with a mean of 25.5 years. The majority received their bachelor's and master's degrees during the

decade of the 1960s during an era of heightened civil rights awareness. Doctorate degrees were awarded to 68.2 percent of the women. For four of the women the highest degree was the educational specialist, and for three of them the master's degree was the highest degree attained.

Data also revealed that the majority of the respondents did not consciously plan to become superintendents. However, a few of the women reported some planned strategies to be selected superintendent once they had penetrated the higher administrative milieu. Strategies most often mentioned were participation in professional academies and training programs, mentoring, making application via professional search bulletins, and "being in the right place at the right time."

The data were clearly evident that no single career pattern could be established that would describe the Black female in her oddysey to the superintendency. For all but three of the superintendents, this was their first experience as superintendent. Many indicated the superintendency to be an ephemeral and one-time experience because of the scarce superintendencies available to them. A large percentage (86.4 percent) of the women were hired by their school boards, and two (9.1 percent) were elected by popular vote to the superintendency.

Overall, their background of personal, academic, and professional education conformed to a normal pattern of preparation that is common to men and women in general in this position.

Research Question 4: What factors led to their success as superintendents?

There was not a single-most factor that propelled these women to success; rather, there was an interplay of several factors. The six factors that

permeated the findings relative to a success pattern of these stalwart and select women were:

1. Factor of Competence. The respondents felt they possessed the requisite skills to do the job in all areas of administration and operations.

2. Factor of Industry. The women put forth diligent effort to realize their goals. They were resourceful individuals who worked hard.

3. Factor of Self-esteem. The women were self-confident and aware of their self-actualizing potential. They had healthy self-concepts.

4. Factor of Strength. The respondents acknowledged their tenaciousness and strong-willed qualities. These qualities often provided the basis upon which everything else rested in order to withstand the rigors of the job and to remain unfettered in both their personal and professional lives.

5. Factor of Interpersonal Relations. Each respondent acknowledged her ability to get along with others as the keystone of her success. Their personalities were multidimensional in the sense of being caring, empathic, and unpretentious.

6. Factor of Productivity. The women queried felt that they exercised their power base most effectively. They were not power phobic yet they were vigilant of the humanistic and motivational texture of school life. Each respondent focused direction toward output and marketing their schools.

The women were influenced by several individuals to pursue their educational goals. Parents, siblings, relatives, friends, and educators were mentioned as having a significant impact in their education careers.

Research Question 5: What unique characteristics do these Black women superintendents possess in their individual lifestyles?

As superintendents, Black women exhibited phenomenal strength, tenaciousness,

assertiveness, and endurance often beyond normal expectations. Their image has been portrayed as being "superwomen."[14] This perception, however, has caused them some concern and annoyance. The implication of such a label infers that the unique nature of Black women was such that they have the capability to show greater than normal success ratios than their peers. This distorted notion brings about added pressure and embodies fallacious thinking. They are likely to stumble and fall as any other superintendent might.

The majority of these women were happily married and had egalitarian relationships with their spouses relative to household and familial responsibilities.

An overwhelming majority (86.3 percent) of the 22 respondents indicated much satisfaction with their positions. Given the chance to repeat the same career pattern, they would choose the superintendency again. They indicated that they liked being at the top and accepted the challenges of being major administrators as a natural part of the job. They felt secure they had chosen the right career.

Even those superintendents in obscure and difficult locations were positive in their career choice. A key point suggested from the findings was that Black women superintendents were often recruited to superintend school districts that were either extremely difficult or in obscure locations around the country. They indicated that, too, if they wanted a chance to be superintendent, they found themselves limited to those restricted choices.

Geographic mobility was deemed by the respondents as essential to their success. The superintendents indicated that women who were upwardly mobile to the top post had to relinquish their old ties to material holdings, i.e., homes, friends, land, and be open to career moves.

Research Question 6: What opinions do these Black women superintendents hold concerning the future role of Black women superintendents?

Regarding the future role of Black women as superintendents, the respondents were optimistic. They predicted that as school populations shift in urban centers from majority to minority enrollments, the door will open wider allowing more Black women to cross the threshold to the chief executive's position. Moreover, they suggested that younger Black women will enter administration and climb the ladder earlier, thus experiencing longer tenures in office. No longer, then, will Black women be looked upon as "oddities" or "superwomen" because there will be appreciably more Black women at the head of school districts.

Another nugget of optimism held that Black women will be hired on the basis of competence and job fit rather than a predilection of color or sex as overarching determinants for available superintendencies.

Conclusions

The conclusions derived from the data present an overview of the career and success pattern of the typical Black woman superintendent in the United States. Her profile symbolized the following characteristics according to the data collected in this study.

The typical Black women superintendent is 46 years of age or older. She is married and has two or more children. In most cases, she had several brothers and sisters when she grew up. Her ordinal position in the family constellation is likely to be either first born or middle child.

The Black woman superintendent has bachelor's, master's, and earned doctorate degrees. She began teaching in an elementary school and advanced to diverse supervisory positions by the age of 36. She was appointed by the

school board to her first superintendency approximately at the age of 45 years. She is very satisfied in her choice of a career and would choose the same one if she had to do it over again. Her school district size is likely to range from very small to very large, although an average would fall between a population of 3,000 to 19,999 pupils. Her annual salary ranges from $34,500 to $78,600, with the average salary at $58,000.

This superintendent is a member of a set of over 16,000 superintendents in the United States and a subset of approximately 29 Black women superintendents. She is likely to be from any geographic region in the United States and probably serves a school district comprised of both elementary and secondary grades.

Recommendations

1. School districts need to provide avenues for identification of promising young Black women for administrative careers early in their educational experience.
2. Colleges and universities should work in concert with school districts in recruiting young Black women for entry-level master's and subsequent doctoral programs and help to track their progress toward completion.
3. Black women aspiring to the superintendency should avail themselves of the proper credentials and become appropriately certificated.
4. Role models should be identified to interact with young, impressionable Black women who aspire to the superintendency.
5. College and university professors should serve as mentors and provide experiential practica in realistic settings in order to increase the skill level of Black women who are inclined toward the superintendency. Provisions should also be made for essential coursework that focuses

on the dynamics of female leadership in the superintendency.

6. Plan ahead to counteract the negative effect that racism and sexism might present by developing alternative actions to advance one's progress.

Notes

[1] J. A. Scimecca, Education and Society (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1980), p. 124.

[2] H. J. Scott, The Black School Superintendent--Messiah or Scapegoat? (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1980), p. 4.

[3] G. Lerner, Black Women in White America: A Documentary History (New York: Pantheon Books, a Division of Random House, 1972), p. xvii.

[4] E. H. Jones and X. P. Montenegro, "Recent Trends in the Representation of Women and Minorities in School Administration and Problems in Documentation," American Association of School Administrators (July 1982), pp. 25, 31.

[5] Scott, The Black School Superintendent, p. 42.

[6] A. B. Revere, "A Description of Black Female School Superintendents in the United States" (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Miami University, Oxford, Ohio, 1985), pp. 67-69.

[7] R. N. Doughty, "The Black Woman in Administration," Integrated Education, 15 (1977): 34-47.

[8] N. L. Arnez, "Selected Black Female Superintendents of Public School Systems," Journal of Negro Education, 51 (Summer 1982): 309-10.

[9] Arnez, "Selected Black Female Superintendents," p. 310.

[10] "Superwomen of Public Education," Ebony Magazine (June 1983), pp. 88-94.

[11] Revere, "A Description of Black Female School Superintendents," pp. 85, 86.

[12] E. H. Jones and X. P. Montenegro, "Women and Minorities in School Administration: Strategies for Making a Difference," American Association of School Administrators (1983).

[13] C. D. Moody, "Identified Black Female Superintendents in the United States," as cited in Revere, "A Description of Black Female Superintendents," pp. 217-18.

[14] Arnez, "Selected Black Female Superintendents," p. 309.